



# ELSAH HISTORY

Number 31

Spring 1980

## AN ELSAH GARDEN IN SELMA SQUARE

Mary Ann Pitchford, the author of the following article, is an enthusiastic and knowledgeable gardener with a discerning eye for color. She has a great interest in the local history tradition of the Village. A previous article appeared in the Winter 1975 issue of *Elsah History* by Mrs. Blanche Darnell entitled "Gardens of Elseh, Then and Now." For those who are interested, this issue is available from Historic Elseh Foundation for 80¢ post-paid.

by Mary Ann Pitchford

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Being a frequent visitor to Elseh for many years, my husband and I were extremely elated when in 1976 we purchased the former Methodist Parsonage, which shares the view of Selma Square with the First Church of Christ, Scientist, and the United Methodist Church.

The brick Greek Revival styling was quite suited to our tastes, but restoring the 19th century structure was only a portion of what we hoped to accomplish. Architecture is one of several basics which attract attention to a historic structure. Other important aspects of a site are the gardens and grounds, out-buildings, and furnishings. In this article I hope to enlighten the reader on the significance of gardens and grounds, thus possibly aiding a fellow member of Historic Elseh in tackling his property.

Using the parsonage as an example, I will try to explain the landscaping changes we have made. Reviewing the existing surroundings to determine which is valuable should be the first step undertaken. The second should be making sure established plantings do not over-power the architecture. In 1976, our house was partially hidden behind a jungle of unkept 25' lilacs, a massive hard maple and a 6' hedge.



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The house could not be appreciated because of the untidy shrubs. The entire yard was on an incline, causing what rain did fall to run directly into the street, confirming the need for good drainage with controlled runoff.

Now to the corrective measures. The house should be the focal point and plantings should only enhance the architecture. The lilacs would have needed to be severely pruned to 3' or 4' and would have taken constant attention for several years to bring them into shape. Therefore, we removed them and the privet hedge entirely, leaving only the massive hard maple. Secondly, to retain moisture we built a 16" stone wall separating the street from the yard and filled and leveled with top soil. Directly in front of the house we eliminated any shrubs higher than 3'. Now the house was attracting the attention it deserved.

Our next goal was to create continual color from season to season, enabling the architecture to be viewed with blossoms, as an exquisite lady and her jewels. This was the task of flowers and ornamental trees. The yard starts with yellow eranthis peeking through the snow in late February, then purple wind flowers and crocus in March. For Easter red tulips and yellow daffodils blend with tiny blue forget-me-nots under a dogwood tree. Purple hyacinths begin to perfume the air about this time, and several wildflowers have been incorporated into the yard. Bloodroot is a favorite from the woods with its white flower and yellow center. The scalloped leaves are very attractive into summer if placed on the north or shaded side. Virginia bluebells wearing their pink buds which will turn to powder blue, yellow bellwort with its nodding belled heads and the smaller red trillium with its mottled leaves have all been tenderly placed in the flowerbeds from their natural environment.

With these, blend in one yellow forsythia shrub, and redbud trees, followed shortly by stellata "Star" magnolia. If you want a prize specimen in your yard, the stellata magnolia, in my opinion, far surpasses in this area the pink magnolia for hardiness, beauty and fragrance. Stellata has the purity of a white gardenia and the fragrance to match. Before the magnolia has the opportunity to drop its cloak of white, the pink flowering almond will start to bloom; and the white dogwood and the red "Cherokee Chief" dogwood will be excelling.

A tree planted in the Village which I enjoy is the Cornus kousa dogwood in the yard of the Village Hall. It blooms later than the native American dogwood, and while the American dogwood blooms before it gets its leaves, the C. kousa leaves first, and then flowers. As fall approaches, the C. kousa bears a beautiful red fruit resembling large strawberries hanging from its branches.

Besides the dogwoods, several crab-apple trees were strategically placed in the yard blooming either red, pink or white.

In early spring the wood ferns begin to unfurl, as I trek through the hollows in knee boots, straw hat, armed with a shovel and burlap sack, stalking a wild Maidenhair. I can't help emphasizing the importance of establishing a wildflower bed in your garden. If dug and planted properly, it requires minimal care and will reward you for many years with its presence. Please heed the rules, taught to me as a child by C. Prentiss Patton, no one famous, just loved; my grandfather.

1. Never dig a wildflower you don't intend to plant immediately.
2. Always dig while ground is cool and damp.
3. Dig deep enough to not disturb root system.
4. At the moment dug, place gently in wet newspapers.
5. Plant in same shaded conditions in yard and add plenty of humus.

With the above rules in mind, the white grandiflora trillium, blue Jacob's ladder, yellow lady's slipper, pink shooting star, etc., will continue to delight year after year.

Perennials are the secret of an old-fashioned garden and the following is a list of those which I have planted in the parsonage yard.

Pansies	Sweet Williams
Bleeding Heart	Asters
Beebalm	Mums
Daisies	Columbine
Spiderwort	Creeping Phlox
Delphinium	Hollyhock
Liriope	Brunnera
Hosta	Coreopsis
Begonia	Iris
Veronica	Butterfly Weed
Poppies	Daylilies
Larkspur	Coralbells
Carnations	Four-O-Clocks
Astilbe	



During the 19th century, when room deodorizers were not available, the ladies of the house relied on various methods to keep down odors. Honeysuckle planted near the kitchen door made stale cooking odors more bearable, Russian olive's yellow/white flowers sent sweet fragrances through the parlor and a vase of iris could hardly be surpassed.

We have a grouping of red four o'clocks which reach 5' tall in July and August if staked. Apparently planted by the former owner, and situated in a corner of the herb garden off the kitchen, they tend to mesmerize me with their sweet smell during the humid evenings of summer.

Being quite fussy about the yard, if a shrub or vine does not have much to offer, it's not kept on the premises. Forsythia is pretty only when in bloom; for this reason I removed all but one. Strawberry bush, also known as spice bush or sweet shrub receives the same treatment as forsythia, one is enough, but for a different reason. The strawberry bush is found in many yards in Elsayah and although the flower isn't exceptional, the fragrance is. When blooming, to close your eyes and inhale is "visions of fresh strawberries and cream" because that's just what it smells like. Delicious!!

Wisteria vine, which was popular in old fashioned gardens, is not tolerated in our yard because of its leggy appearance, but a Wisteria tree is. We get the same aromatic benefits without the destructive powers of a vine. I would like to add this word of caution regarding anything vining. If you decide to plant anything vining: wisteria, clematis, honeysuckle, euonymus, ivy, etc., please for the sake of preservation, provide a trellis, arbor, etc. for it to grow on and not on your home. More old structures -- both wood and masonry -- have had irreparable damage done to their exteriors because vines have been allowed to entwine themselves in the clapboard, brick or stone. The climber's tenacles work into mortar or joints allowing moisture to penetrate, freeze, expand and crack the surface. Also, pulling off the vines after they are established, tears off pieces of the structure. Please take heed.

Besides the perennials, annual fillers used for their beauty are: marigold, red salvia, blue salvia, geranium and cockscomb. The marigold also works as a great deterrent to insects and is dried for hanging in the kitchen. The red salvia provides a daily appearance of hummingbirds. The blue salvia is dried for winter bouquets and as filler in herb wreaths. During the long winter months, the geraniums brighten a sunny window with their blossoms.



The cockscomb is dried and with its wide range of color decorates the kitchen walls during the snowy season.

Planted as an annual, and which I forgot to mention above, is caladium. If you have a shaded area under a tree where you would like a splash of color, caladiums are hard to beat. Ours are planted under a dogwood and mingled with wild ginger to brighten an otherwise dark, gloomy space.

Although an extensive vegetable garden is not found in our yard, we do grow tomatoes, lettuce, rhubarb, onions and corn. A common practice of gardeners in the past century if they were limited in space was to place small vegetables in the flower beds. Peas, onions, parsnips, radishes, carrots and lettuce are quite attractive in a flower or herb garden.

An elderly lady near here still runs green beans up a trellis on the side of

her porch, both for easy picking and for the shade provided. Carrots with their frilly tops make a pleasing border for larkspur. Tansy grown adjacent to tomatoes, it is claimed, make them juicier, while rhubarb chard (spinach family) makes a beautiful foundation border as well as being delicious to eat.

Herb gardens were extremely popular in past centuries for medicinal purposes, beauty, seasoning, etc. Rue is a very good insect repellent, and also is used for seasoning cheese. We grow sage, caraway thyme, English thyme, chives, lemon balm, peppermint, spearmint, and basil for enhancing flavors in cooking. Artemisia, santolina and betony are used in dried bouquets with feverfew. For potpourri and sachets use germander, bee-balm and the mints.

By now, we are well into late summer and autumn and relying on mums, live-forever, global amaranth and red pepper plants to brighten the yard. The ornamental and shade trees are turning to shades of orange, red or yellow and the mountain ash and bittersweet have their clusters of red and orange.

The tulips and hyacinth bulbs have arrived for planting and the leaves begin to fall announcing the season's end.

You will notice that roses were not covered in the above. Roses belong in every old-fashioned garden and are soon to be added to ours. Because of the many landscaping tasks undertaken to date and the construction of a stone wall this spring, a rose garden had been shelved until summer. The roses will be grown for arrangements, potpourri, jewelry and possibly candy. If successful, perhaps next year an article on: Roses - Their Culture and Uses.



## THE CHARACTER OF ELSAH

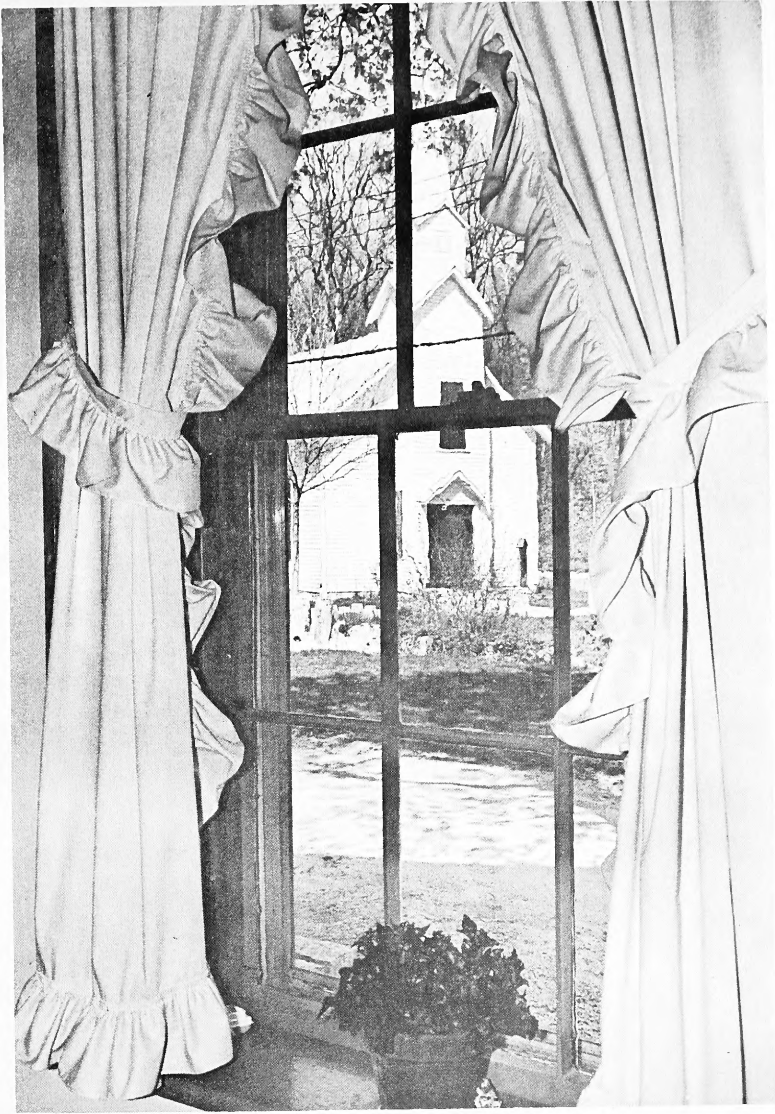
An editorial by Charles Hosmer

The Illinois Preservation Calendar for 1980 lists a great many house tours. For the first time Elsau is missing from the roster, and this decision represents a departure from the established practice in nearly every historic district in the nation. On the surface it seems foolish for the board of the Historic Elsau Foundation to decide to cut the organization off from its principal means of support over a number of years. Many of us have sensed the excitement that came with the weekend of Mother's Day, noting with pride how all the citizens of the Village have worked to make the community look its best. There was a magic moment almost every one of those Sunday mornings, a great feeling of anticipation as we prepared to share Elsau with our friends from Jersey County, Alton and St. Louis.

The hard question is this: do we really want to save the character of Elsau or simply maintain its buildings in good shape? How many people can the Village contain in one day? At what point do we find ourselves living in a historical attraction instead of a pleasant river-front Village?

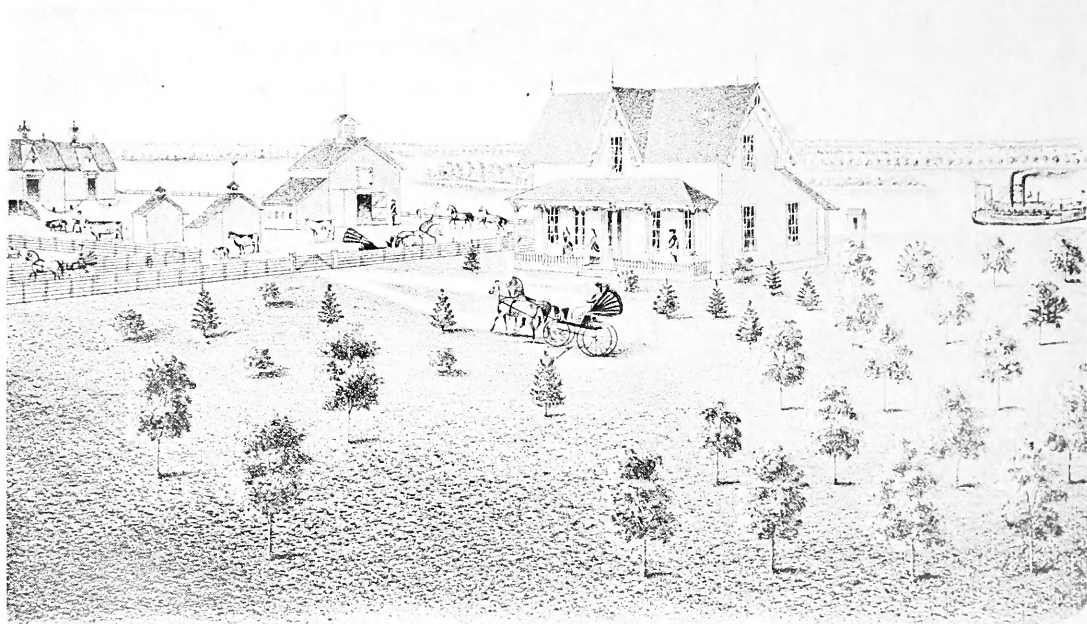
Many of us will remember the house tour several years ago when the number of visitors was so great that we were overwhelmed with our own success. Your editor remembers spending five hours on his doorstep trying to talk to the line of guests (some without real tickets because we had run out). In the background the hosts and hostesses were trying to push the ticketholders through the house to make way for more. It seemed for one day that we had been killed by success; our community had created a monster that overwhelmed those of us that live here and our friends from other towns as well.

The economic stagnation in Elsau has now ended. There are three businesses operating in various parts of the Village that serve our regular visitors throughout the year: the Elsau Emporium, the Elsau Landing Restaurant, and the Maybeck Gallery. Since 1976 the restaurant has proven to be a very popular spot for visitors from all over the metropolitan St. Louis area and southern Illinois. The River



# **AN ELSAH ALBUM**

**SPRING 1980**



*Bellview Farm, Residence of E. M. FULLER circa Jersey Co Ill.*

1

This drawing is originally from the Jersey County Historical Atlas published in 1872. It depicts a farm once called Bellview; the farmhouse itself occupied the site where now stands the Principia College Chapel.



2



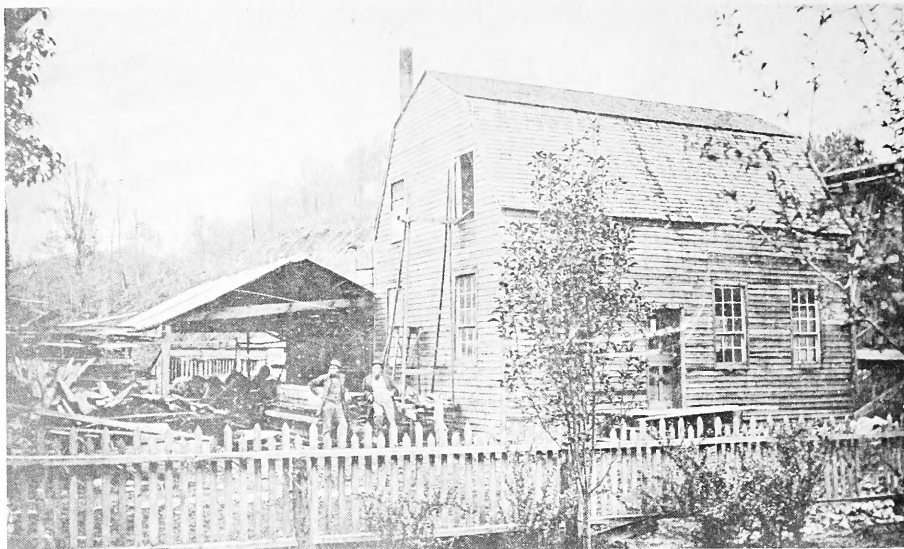


The photograph to the left (courtesy of the Principia Archives), was taken in 1930 and shows the farmhouse in its original place and prior to its relocation on the Chapel Green for use as an administrative building. After serving two decades in that capacity, it was razed in 1964.

When owned by Lucy Semple Ames (daughter of Elsay's founder, James Semple), it was called "Eastover" and was used by Mrs. Ames during her summer visits to Elsay after the burning of her Notchcliff estate in 1912.

Note the particular grace which the carpenter-gothic bargeboard gives to the building. It is also interesting to observe the artistic license used in the drawing which so freely redesigns the bluff and river terrain!

Above photo courtesy The Principia Archives.



4

Elsah has only one four-way stop and it is located at the intersection of Mill and Maple streets. Within the year this intersection will be active with the construction of a new, wider bridge. The above photo (4) shows the McNair brothers Robert (left) and William leaning on a pile of freshly milled lumber. Taken about 1887, this photograph shows the mill located on what is now a plot of grass immediately adjacent to Maple Street on the north side. (Photo source: Mrs. Beulah Carpenter)

Across the street from the mill stood the Ellis home (5) where now stands a modern split-level home. Perhaps the most gracefully proportioned of Elsay's mansard roofs, the photo proves how effective a little architectural decoration can be on an otherwise simple structure! (Photo source: Kent Hake)

Note the railroad trestle which appears in the mill picture is missing from the Ellis photo dating the latter to 1890 or later.



5



Road and the bike path have brought hikers, photographers, cyclists, and Sunday drivers who enjoy Elsay in almost every season. We may not realize it, but we have all become used to the tourists who walk past our homes on weekends, play in our park and line up to eat at the Elsay Landing. For the most part these people have been happy to park at the riverfront or in the church parking lot at Maple and LaSalle Streets. They have respected and enjoyed the charm of the streets of Elsay. A number of civic organizations in other communities have contacted Historic Elsay Foundation so that they could arrange walking tours with a few busloads of people at a time. Some of these visits have included tours of a few homes in the Village.

It is possible that we have enough people in Elsay on most weekends without creating any event that will bring in hundreds more. What would the additional visitors see? More tourists with a few 19th century buildings as a backdrop for the traffic congestion. It appears that the valley has a capacity limit that we have finally exceeded.

There are other compelling reasons for us to reconsider the need for regular house tours on Mother's Day. Nearly every historic district that sponsors these events has been able to offer the public a wide range of houses over the years. Few home owners have had to place their living quarters on exhibit annually. Elsay has a very limited number of houses, and our visitors have shown remarkable fortitude in coming back time after time to look at the same group of buildings. Careful planning has made it possible for an experienced crew to supervise the parking problems created by a house tour under good weather conditions -- we still have to be ready for Sundays when a rain-storm will make our extra parking facilities into mud holes. For more than a decade members of Historic Elsay Founda-

tion have given many hours to the detailed planning necessary for the house tours: bake sales, ticket sales, arrangements for arts and crafts, communications with home-owners, hosts and hostesses, publicity, and many other activities. These details may escape the gaze of the visitors who only come on Mother's Day, but the board of Historic Elsay Foundation knows that some people have taken responsibility for each of the tasks necessary for the tours.

The decision to abolish or alter the house tour format does not mean that the Foundation has found a new means of support. We have depended heavily upon the income from the spring tours. It has been more important than our membership fees and sales of literature. Although we have owned an important Elsay commercial property, the income from that source has been small because we have had to make extensive repairs to the structure. The rental income has been very close to our expenses because we want to encourage the Elsay Landing, a business that has put a good deal of its own money into alterations to the building. On top of that Historic Elsay Foundation has expended thousands of dollars on restoration of the Village Hall, the building that was the first focal point for the house tours. We are carrying a mortgage on the commercial property, and there are still some important improvements that will be needed in the next few years.

The Foundation was carefully audited this past spring and the Internal Revenue Service was most impressed with the scope of our operation and the entirely voluntary workforce. We received the permission to carry on.

You, the members of HEF, have an opportunity to tell us whether or not you agree with the course of action proposed by the board. The answer is a disarmingly simple one: raise your membership to the level of a sustaining



member and see if you can get a few of your friends who may be interested in Elsay to join the Foundation and support its publications program. If several hundred of our regular members raise their donations to the sustaining membership category, we will have made up the lost income from the house tours.

In return for this "vote of confidence" we can offer all of you two things: a Village that still appears to be a magic survival from a more peaceful era -- and a private house tour for the individuals who choose to support the Foundation in a substantial way. These two goals are difficult to describe in monetary terms. Walking through Elsay on a quiet spring evening is a very special experience, especially if you are able to enjoy the groupings of homes and outbuildings without the noise from automobiles and the clatter of tourists. We are confident that Elsay homeowners would be glad to share their love for this community in a quiet, dignified way with the people who have chosen to support all the activities of the Foundation through many years as sustaining members.

We do not want to pretend that the course of action we have proposed here is the best answer for the historical organizations that sponsor tours in Alton, Belleville, Lafayette Park and Souland. Our decision to do away with the spring tour is not an effort to be exclusive. We know that we cannot bring back the isolation that was here before the coming of the River Road. Elsay is something that we all want to share with our friends and neighbors. We simply believe that the preservation of the character of Elsay demands that we permit our citizens and those who come to tour our community a chance to "discover" the quiet of Elsay as much as our modern world has permitted that silence to exist. The charm of Elsay is a fragile quality that extends beyond the act of preserving old houses; it is a magic sense of a picture that is framed by hillsides, roofed by trees and punctuated by houses, outbuildings, streets and culminates in a riverfront.



## OUR NEW FORMAT

Throughout the years there have been many sources of Elsay photographs as you will have noticed from the picture credits in previous issues. Some of our photos have come from as far away as Seattle, Washington!

With the efforts and great interest of individuals such as Paul Williams, whose talents include the many aspects of photography, a permanent collection of reproducible photographs is being accumulated. For example, when photographs of Elsay have been located, Paul has often made copies if the owners have preferred to keep the originals.

We are also fortunate to have a growing collection of current photographs which someday may be as intriguing to readers as our old ones now are.

To better present these photographs to our readers, the Foundation is experimenting with a change in the Newsletter format. By having the photographs reproduced separately from the text of the articles, a better quality of printing can be achieved and the "pullout" section can be the nucleus of An Elsay Album.

Sometimes original old photographs or tintypes are not of the best quality but are worthy of reproduction for historic interest. So while there may be some variable quality, the new format will strive for sharper, more exact reproductions of the originals.

We hope you will have fun with this idea. Please let us know what you think of the format as we experiment with it during this year's issues!

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Every so often it is a good idea for all of us to be grateful for the good work that makes Historic Elsie Foundation a going operation.

Admittedly, Historic Elsie does not have a problem with low salaries. Nobody gets paid! All we can give to our good workers is our gratitude in such little ways as this.

We are grateful to those who put in endless hours composing articles for our newsletters. We want to give special thanks to Paul Williams and others for their painstaking work in taking, finding, and duplicating our growing collection of photographs illustrative of every facet of Village life past and present. Physical labor should not be overlooked, either, especially by those who mend our fences, touch up our signs with paint, mow the lawn of the Village Hall, restore our beloved Calaboose into a nice office, and (probably) do all sorts of little things of which the rest of us are not aware.

We are grateful to our collaborators, the generous members of Historic Elsie, both here at home and in such provinces as California, Michigan, Florida and other outlying Elsie suburbs. Your contributions support this Newsletter, of course but also our many restoration activities. Your money has helped to restore and maintain the Village Hall and the Commercial Building. We look forward to the time when we will be able to protect and restore other property as well. So keep the money coming -- it's tax deductible!

Finally, we are grateful to Elsie's citizens who have restored their homes, often at great expense, when it would have been much cheaper either to sell out or tear them down and start afresh.

As one resident of Elsie recalls, who has lived here 20 years, the Village has been transformed in this time from a quaint but compelling little place, into an attractive little town, still quaint, still compelling, still intimate and homey, but justly deserving of the regional and even national fame it is gaining.

To all of you our thanks -- and congratulations!

Jim Belote



## NOTES TO OUR MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS

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### Subscriptions

For a variety of reasons, the Foundation has been unable to publish its Newsletters on a regular basis -- always the equivalent of four issues a year but not always on a systematic schedule.

Every effort is now being made to meet a seasonal schedule patterned after other quarterly publications and memberships, which follow the calendar year. Each year will start with a Spring issue followed by Summer, Fall and Winter issues (the Winter issue being published in December of each year.)

New membership subscriptions may be started at any time during the year. New subscribers will receive issues published previous to their date of membership for the current calendar schedule.

This is the first issue of 1980. Memberships renewed for 1979 have run out. Please renew your membership and support the work of Historic Elsie Foundation!

## Part II

Our Editor, Charles Hosmer, is in the process of making a major contribution to the history of the American preservation movement with the publication of his second volume on the topic: Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust. Slightly under 1300 pages, the book will be published this fall with two separate bindings but with consecutive pagination. We are particularly happy with the thought of our Editor returning to his post for the Foundation's mere eight-pager!

## A Gardener

Friends of Historic Elsie have been glad to know that long-time resident of Elsie, Miss Lucy McDow, has recovered quickly from the effects of a fall.

Visitors in early spring missed her magnificent vegetable garden, but now have happily noticed Miss Lucy once again tending her garden with that devoted care which brings forth such special results.



## Visitors Center

HEF is proud to announce the opening of its Visitors Center in the restored and properly decorated Elsie Village Hall.

The Center is open on Saturdays and Sundays from 2 to 4 p.m., from the first of April until the day after Thanksgiving.

All of HEF's publications, and its portfolios, are available there, as well as a selection of paintings by Glenn Felch depicting Elsie scenes.

An interesting picture display and several scale models, both by Glenn Felch, show the architectural history of the valley and help the visitor enjoy his stay.

The Foundation is grateful to Mr. George Dean for serving as official host and coordinator of the Visitors Center open hours. If you would like to volunteer a Saturday or Sunday afternoon (2-4) to welcome visitors to Elsie in the Village Hall, please contact Mr. Dean at 374-1699 or Edie Belote at 374-2277.



## Public Meeting

Historic Elsie Foundation invites its members to a public meeting, which will be held in the HEF Visitors Center in the Elsie Village Hall on Saturday, October 11, 1980 at 4 o'clock.

The aims and plans for the future, as well as past accomplishments of the Foundation will be discussed. In addition reports by the President, Treasurer, and Secretary will be made.

The Foundation is interested in your ideas and is looking forward to comments and discussion.

This public meeting follows the first private Elsie house tour sponsored by HEF for its sustaining members. The homes will be open from 12 noon until 4 o'clock.

Further details will be published in the next issue of the Newsletter.



THANK YOU FOR YOUR  
DONATIONS OF OVER \$10.00!

Mrs. Clifford Hance, Elsie  
John & Elizabeth Grace, Elsie  
James Green, Elsie  
Mrs. Harold Wells, Elsie  
Mr. & Mrs. Robert Middlecoff, Alton  
Mrs. Dorinda LeClair, Boston, MA  
Mr. & Mrs. Vernon Piper, St. Louis  
W. R. Baker, Amarillo, TX  
Beatrice Whitelaw, Washington, DC  
Mrs. Florence Sperry, Port Huron, MI  
Kathryn Johnson, Chesterfield, MO  
Mr. & Mrs. E. R. Slaughter, Dallas, TX  
Lee & Cora Stickler, Elsie  
Charles & Joan Sheppard, Godfrey, IL  
William & Sona Winter, Alton  
Judy Blackburn & John Williams,  
McLean, VA

Ray & Blanch Darnell, Elsie  
Mr. & Mrs. John Swett, Lombard, IL  
Horace & Betty Mayo, Wellesley  
Hills, MA

Alma & Paul Barnes, Elsie  
Bill & Teenie Van Vleck, St. Louis  
R.B. Tullis, Vero Beach, FL  
Margaret & Harold Bunting, Kirkwood, MO

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Floral decorations for this issue are from Dover Publications  
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